

literature on literature itself. Major Israeli writers such as David Grossman and Amos Oz are well known in the West. But aside from the late poet Mahmud Darwish, even many Middle East scholars would be hard-pressed to name a Palestinian writer. What is the role of literature in the conflict? Could literature serve as a "cultural backdoor" to a deeper understanding of the "other" and the conflict? Could it even serve as an avenue for reconciliation? Runo Isaksen's *Literature and War: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian Writers* attempts to answer these questions by means of interviews with prominent Israeli and Palestinian authors. This is a book of many, perhaps too many, stated goals, which nonetheless provides an important perspective on both the possibilities and limits of literature as a tool of conflict resolution.

Isaksen situates himself as an outsider to the conflict, a Norwegian writer and journalist who, inspired by André Brink's speech at a Norwegian conference on the role black and white South African writers played in ending apartheid, wonders if Israeli and Palestinian writers can join forces in a similar way. Literature, says Isaksen, "is always about people and therefore also about reality in one way or another" (p. 8). It is a means of getting beyond everyday media representations and "delv[ing] deeper into something more fundamental . . . reach[ing] the individual . . . hear[ing] what people think about the 'enemy' and themselves" (p. 8). Later, Isaksen ponders the relationship between literature and the conflict: "Is a political solution needed first, before literature can play a role? Or should literature come first—as a force that can help guide policy or lay the foundation for political solutions?" (p. 191) Additionally, Isaksen asks the writers on both sides about their familiarity with, and access to, the other's literature and about representations of the Palestinian or Israeli "other" in their work.

To conduct his fieldwork, Isaksen visited Israel and Palestine in spring 2002 and autumn 2003. Of his twenty interviews, fifteen are included in the book, comprising seven Jewish Israelis, seven West Bank Palestinians, and one Palestinian Israeli (Salman Natour), presented as "an Israeli-Palestinian Contribution." In explaining his exclusion of diaspora Palestinian writers, Isaksen notes that he chose to include only

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Literature and War: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian Writers, by Runo Isaksen, translated by Kari Dickson. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009. 224 pages. Biographical notes to p. 212. Bibliography to p. 222. \$18.00 paper.

Reviewed by Lital Levy

In the vast sea of literature on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rarely do we find

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writers who "reside and work in Israel or Palestine" and have proximity to the conflict. With the exception of Natour, he also excluded Palestinians living in Israel so as not to "overstretch the framework" required by the book (p. 197). Two women authors were interviewed from each side. Most of the authors are secular and centrist or left of center; all the Israeli authors were in favor of the two-state solution but rejected the Palestinian right of return, while all the Palestinian writers were in favor either of a binational state or the two-state solution. No writers from Gaza were interviewed, and none of the Palestinian writers espoused an Islamist orientation. It is unclear whether this omission is due to logistical difficulties in visiting Gaza or is simply an oversight on the part of the author. While the book's first half concentrates on Israeli authors of Hebrew literature and the second on Palestinian authors of Arabic literature, questions of knowing and representing the "other" permeate both parts. *Literature and War* also details Isaksen's difficulties in locating Palestinian writers and negotiating checkpoints. At times it seems to be telling two separate stories: that of Isaksen's own travails in crossing the border, which often reads as a manifestation of the more abstract questions he asks about literature and the conflict, and then the interviews themselves.

The book is somewhat hampered by the naïveté of its basic assumptions. Although Isaksen seems well informed, he repeats certain longstanding clichés. He describes his subject as "an age-old conflict" (p. 10), yet the causes enumerated do not predate 1948. To his credit, however, Isaksen allows the authors interviewed to refute his assumptions. For example, Oz states that "unlike South Africa, the conflict here does not stem from a misunderstanding. It is not a result of Jews and Palestinians not knowing each other" (p. 64). In fact, all the Palestinian and Israeli authors interviewed reject the idea that they could replicate the South African model, albeit for different reasons. Isaksen explicitly recognizes the lack of symmetry between Israel

and Palestine (p. 11) in terms of cultural, social, political, and economic infrastructure (there are, for example, several major publishing houses in Israel, which are completely lacking in Palestine). A related point concerns the asymmetry of translation, whereby considerably more Israeli literature is translated into Arabic than Palestinian literature is into Hebrew. In both cases, however, the dearth of translated literature stymies dialogue.

On a technical level, the book's English (translated from the Norwegian) is serviceable but rather weak. Transliterations from Hebrew and Arabic are riddled with errors ("sjahid" for "shahid," which in any case should be the plural "shuhada," p. 35; "el-andaluz" for "al-Andalus," p. 117; "Pesagot" for "Pisgot," p. 156). Throughout the interview with Dorit Rabinan, an Israeli writer of Iranian Jewish descent, "Arab" is used interchangeably with "Middle Eastern" or "Islamic," perpetuating the same kind of misleading generalizations the author seems to be trying to break down. Finally, the book contains an unnecessary amount of atmospheric description (what Isaksen and the interviewees ordered to eat or drink in the cafes, the attitudes of the waiters). Overall, as one may have inferred by now, this is more of a journalistic venture than a scholarly volume.

Despite its shortcomings, however, *Literature and War* fills a niche in the field. It is a useful companion book for courses on the literature of the conflict, as students can read interviews with many of the authors whose works of fiction may be assigned. Similarly, it can add a cultural perspective to history courses on the conflict. Students will doubtless find the first-person perspectives of the authors enriching and informing. (Before assigning the book, however, professors should be cautioned that the dialogues are rife with expletives.) Isaksen is to be commended for taking on a difficult and thorny topic and for persevering in his interviews, despite objective hardships. The result is a somewhat uneven but highly engaging read.